

Editing and Revising Academic Writing

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The process of revising a paper involves the activities of editing, proofreading, and true revision. **Editing** is the process of fixing minor problems related to presentation. **Proofreading** is the correction of mistakes in punctuation, spelling, and grammar. Real **revision** is more than making a few minor adjustments. It requires being open to the idea that parts of your paper (and sometimes the entire paper) might need to be re-thought and re-written.

It may help you to remember that everyone needs to revise the first drafts of their written work. This is especially true if the original draft was written under a tight deadline (such as for a class), because most people do not produce their best work under pressure. Our writing can always be improved further. Even well-established scholars, both native and non-native speakers, will write multiple drafts.

One of the first things you should do is try to see your paper with fresh eyes. There are a number of techniques that can help you to do this.

Give yourself as much as a break as possible, whether that's a month, a day, or an hour.

Work from a hard copy, not from the computer.

Read slowly, and really focus on what is actually on the page.

Read the paper aloud.

Ask for feedback from professors, EAP tutoring, the Writing Center, or English-speaking friends.

Imagine what you would do differently now if you were writing the paper from scratch.

It is also helpful to keep in mind your priorities for revision. There are three main areas of focus for the revision process, and they should be prioritized in the following order: **Argument, Grammar, Style**. It is best to focus first on the big issues, and fix the smaller ones along the way, or move to them as you have time.

You may also find the following steps for revision helpful. As you check out off each item, ask yourself the following questions.

1. **Locate your thesis**—Do you state this clearly, succinctly, and early in the paper? Does the rest of the paper work to support this thesis?
2. **Consider your readers and purpose**—Is your style of writing and argumentation sufficiently effective for those purposes?
3. **Switch from writer-centered to reader-centered**—Pretend you are reading someone else's work; what criticisms would you make? Which parts of the paper are successful and which need more work?
4. **Evaluate the evidence**—Does the body of the paper support your main point? Do you provide enough evidence? Have you failed to address certain counterarguments?

5. **Save the good stuff**—Does every part of the paper relate back to your thesis? If something doesn't fit, consider whether you should cut it or change your thesis to incorporate it.
6. **Clean up your writing**—Are all your ideas expressed clearly and well? Cut out unnecessary words and sentences, and clarify vague points
7. **Fix grammar and usage errors**—Use spellcheck to correct spelling errors as you work through larger-order problems; check your grammar and usage; ask for help

Once you have worked through these major issues, you may also find it helpful to examine your work at the levels of paragraphs and sentences.

At the Paragraph Level:

Summarize each paragraph—

Do you cover all the necessary material?

Is there repetition?

Does your outline make sense?

Do you transition well between paragraphs?

For each individual paragraph

Does the paragraph cover a single idea?

Do you make your points thoroughly enough?

Can you express matters more succinctly?

Do your sentences work together to form a coherent paragraph?

At the Sentence Level:

Does every sentence make sense? Do they all follow grammatical rules?

Is your sentence structure varied enough? Consider sentence length, opening words (for sentences and paragraphs), and style.

If all your sentences tend to be the same length, try to combine two shorter sentences into a more complex sentence, or break complex ones into shorter ones for emphasis.

Are there unnecessary words?

“The scholar argued for the importance of the idea that...” vs. “The scholar supported (the idea)”

Be sure to consider the **Vocabulary** of your paper

Highlight words you use frequently

Do you use them too much? (2+ times per paragraph, 3+ times per page)

Can you rephrase, or are you using a precise term?

Find synonyms in thesaurus or online

But before you replace a word, be certain you have a clear understanding of the original word and what you are replacing it with!

Notes for ESL Practitioners

The more you read in English, the stronger your ‘noticing’ skills will be for your own work.

Work hard at noticing your own errors.

Always look over returned papers to see what mistakes were made.

If you seek help from EAP, the Writing Center, or friends, keep a list of what errors you tend to make, and always examine your papers for them before turning them in.

Some of the most common ESL errors include: articles; prepositions (in phrases, with verbs); verb tenses; and vocabulary usage

Ozdic.com is a good resource to look up collocations (words which tend to be used together)

Some Final Advice:

Think critically about what you have written, and ask yourself:

Is it really worth saying?

Does it say what you wanted to say?

Will a reader understand what you are saying?

Focus on only **2-3 areas** for each revision session, then take a break.

Using Track Changes (in Word) can be helpful to keep track of large changes you make.

You may also find it helpful to create a new document for each draft stage.

For additional resources on writing and proofreading, see the **Purdue OWL website**.